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ABSTRACT

Special education in the People's Republic of China is discussed as it relates to the structure of the Chinese family; the change in attitudes and treatment from "liberation" to "post-liberation" China; and the present emphasis on non-labeling, de-stigmatization, and integration of the handicapped. (SBH)

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Stephan Hittman

Dating back over fifty centuries, China can be said to have the longest continuous history of any nation on the earth. Unlike other early civilizations, despite periods of war, chaos, and foreign rule, China has endured and maintained a resilient cultural continuity.

In part because of this, history and tradition loom large in Chinese life. To understand both the general and special education systems, it is prerequisite to closely examine the Chinese family structure.

Having long thought in terms of the family, the Chinese have looked to the necessity of resolving nuclear problems by and for themselves, rather than trusting to dependency on larger or more impersonal groups. The extended family system has traditionally given protection to all of its members; the larger the family, the better able it has been to cope with the contingencies of life (Sung, 1967).

As a result of this, the Chinese family continues to assume much of the responsibility for developmental disorders. Since the traditional cultural emphasis has been on the family and not on cooperative groups, the development of social agencies to provide supplementary services to persons at risk has been quite slow. If a family has a handicapped member, the parents assume lifetime responsibility for him. If no longer in a position to support him, siblings or other close relatives are committed to his care.

While some might be quick to draw comparisons between China and the United States, it is only fair to mention that to us, as Westerners and Occidentals, China presents an entirely different scale of values. The United States and China have evolved from and represent two very different cultures. It is incumbent upon us to recognize and accept, that what is feasible in one, may not necessarily be so for the other.

Prior to 1949 when the Communists' took power in China, which they call "liberation," mysticism, ignorance, and the superstitious fears of the populace dominated their way of

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thinking. Despite the reverence for family members, handicapped persons appear to have often been treated quite cruelly by their relatives.

Dr. James L. McCartney, an American neuropsychiatrist who practiced in China, tells how the mentally ill were treated in 1926, with it likely that these practices date back to antiquity and can be generalized to include the physically and mentally handicapped as well.

"Mental patients constitute a very helpless class in China. If caught upon the streets doing anything wrong, they are arrested and thrown into prison and treated as if they were criminals. If they are harmless and wander in the streets, they are mocked and laughed at, and are often stoned. Their families often treat them as strangers and confine them in a dark room.

If they tear their clothes or are otherwise destructive, their closest relatives sometimes disown them, although there may be true affection shown by a family...especially if he be a son. Most cases are kept chained at home. The head of the family is held responsible for the acts of the members; therefore, he has a desire to subject the insane member severely.

The fact that demon possession is believed in results in cruel treatment to try to drive the demon out" ("Chinese Psychiatry Revisited", 1972).

Since 1949, the Chinese have attempted to eradicate this feudal mind by instruction in a new morality, based on the social, economic, and political goals of post-liberation China.

The writings of Mao Tse-tung have been the principal vehicle for bringing the entire population of China from a feudal way of thinking, characterized by superstition, fatalism, and illiteracy, to a modern scientific outlook. The Chinese have literally attempted to bridge this enormous gap in but a single generation (Sidel, 1972).

Human life, as compared with other factors of production, especially in times of stress or turmoil, has been abundant and therefore cheap (Fairbank, 1968). Euthanasia and

infanticide, formerly practiced with the handicapped with great frequency, is now an unacceptable concept held up to ridicule by the Chinese people. The Chinese today openly express their growing awareness that handicapped persons can become contributing members of society. Given appropriate training and instruction, the handicapped can and usually do become socially and vocationally successful, with the large majority of them being satisfactorily integrated into productive communal life.

Developing societies often seek to solve their general educational problems first, usually by providing elementary and secondary education opportunities for those with relatively uncomplicated learning needs, while attempting to raise the average literacy level of their citizenry to some arbitrary point (Koch and Dobson, 1971). General education programs of this type are now well underway in China. Elementary school education is now universal, with some 45 million students. Intermediate school education is universal in the cities of China, with some 17 million students. Since these general education programs are roughly consistent with the desired long-range expectations of the government, it is this author's feeling that the future will see the implementation of greater specialized instruction for those with more complicated learning needs, such as the retarded.

It is generally felt that the problem of special education is much more acute in industrialized countries than it is in agricultural ones, this primarily because in agricultural societies the exceptional child can usually more easily adapt.

80% of the population of China, over 650 million people, live in the rural countryside. There are institutions for the small number of profoundly retarded and severely multiply handicapped individuals in China, but this seems to be the extent of long-term government services and facilities for them.

While some severely retarded children occasionally attend a special kindergarten, this is viewed as only a temporary measure, and only until they're ready for placement in a regular

class. If a teacher discovers a student to have a specific learning, emotional, or behavioral problem, this is immediately communicated with the parents. However, teachers interpret these problems to be within their realm of responsibility, moreso than that of the parents, and personally provide additional individual attention to the youngster, often long beyond the regular school-day, to help him to keep up with his classmates as best he can (Sidel, 1972).

Other retardates are being mainstreamed into regular elementary school classes, since there are no special classes, per se, for them. The majority of adolescent and older retardates are generally employed in agriculture, since academic or comparable performance requiring literacy are not essential criteria for survival in an overwhelmingly rural society.

Requiring limited skills for specific tasks, while making a legitimate contribution to communal efforts, the retarded individual can make a positive contribution to his country, gain the respect of his family and fellow-workers, and live a life of meaningful experience and community involvement.

From the Chinese point of view, their present attitudes and policies towards education and mental health -- the main purpose of which are to change fundamental thinking and behavior -- are in the best long-term interests of the country. The retarded and continuing to be absorbed into what is an overwhelmingly rural, agricultural society, which, for quite some time to come, will be dependent upon a huge force of semi-skilled and unskilled labor. A force to which the retarded are contributorily capable.

The principal function of all school's in China are to begin to instill basic attitudes important to the new China, that is, developing a communal consciousness and a sense of responsibility. For all students on all levels, moral education and the elevation of one's political consciousness come first, intellectual studies come thereafter.

Chinese society appears today to have a sound approach to community mental health and to the handicapped. Stressed are self-reliance and mutual dependence, all within a framework of

group dynamics. Non-labeling, de-stigmatization, and integration into community life are emphasized. The social consequences of handicapping conditions, that is, inability to find a job, loss of family support, loss of one's role in the community -- things that contribute to chronicity -- are not characteristic of modern China (Sidel, 1972). Indeed, the watchword of the entire approach can be attributed to an axiom of Mao Tse-tung, which is: "Let us heal the wounded and rescue the dead."

In the absence of authoritative works on Chinese special education, the announced early goal of the Red Guard's, i.e., the elimination of the "Four Olds" (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits) can be viewed as finally achieving its end (Hu, 1969).

In terms of special education and of the Chinese attitude toward the handicapped, a formal resurgence of classic humanism appears to be beginning to take place. Thus, habilitative and rehabilitative services for the handicapped in China, is likely to be a progressively changing picture, which we in the West would do well to observe.

Stephan Hittman
"Special Education in the People's Republic of China"

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